

Minding the local-foreign divide



In a bid to focus on the Singaporean identity, one must be cautious not to create a division between Singaporeans and non-Singaporeans, including permanent residents.

With nearly 40 per cent of the population in Singapore being foreigners, that divide could be very destabilising, if not managed properly, said Ms Corinna Lim, executive director of the Association of Women for Action and Research (Aware), at a conference on identity this week.

Groups could fall through the cracks, such as migrant spouses with Singaporean children, and the creation of different categories of people here can result in dangerous divides like first class or second class, she said.

The local-foreign divide has been hotly discussed over the years in Singapore.

Institute of Policy Studies principal research fellow Mathew Mathews said this is a fault line that has become more apparent due to changes in economic strategy.

He said: "When Singapore shifted its focus to be a regional and global hub, and adopted a more liberal immigration policy, the concerns about migrants became more apparent, especially when more Singaporeans felt threatened with job losses and a rise in cost of living."

During the 2011 General Election, an immigration policy seen as too lax amid an influx of foreigners was possibly the most emotionally and politically charged issue, as Singaporeans complained about overcrowding and perceived unfair job competition.

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The Government subsequently introduced a range of tools to tighten the inflow of foreign workers at every skill tier, such as high foreign worker levies and stricter criteria for S Pass and Employment Pass holders.

Xenophobia has also resurfaced during the Covid-19 pandemic, with some foreigners accused of "spreading the virus here".

The recent parliamentary debate over the India-Singapore Comprehensive Economic Cooperation Agreement (Ceca) also has roots in the local-foreign divide.

Finance Minister Lawrence Wong had said that the Progress Singapore Party's campaign against Ceca had "strong racist and xenophobic undertones". His fellow ministers made a similar point.

In response, PSP's Non-Constituency MP Leong Mun Wai said the reason for the party's position on Ceca had "nothing to do with race or xenophobia".

Responding at the discussion to this point by Aware's Ms Lim, psychology professor David Chan from Singapore Management University said it would be dangerous to act as if the Singaporean identity is the "only and most powerful force to bind people together and all other things don't matter".

That is not the case, as common values and a respect for dignity can also bind people together.

He noted that there is no country, government or people who in discussions deliberately leave out national identity and citizenship.

He said: "I think Singaporeans would very much like to say that as Singaporeans, (this is what) we have in common and share in our identity. That's not inconsistent with a cosmopolitan city... a place where you can co-exist with foreigners and permanent residents."